

## The Midway Hotel

The drive home would take hours. After a long day of unproductive meetings I felt frustrated and drained; I desperately needed some sleep. I cursed to myself as I sped along the lonely, country road as I wished I had just stayed in the city.

I had no idea where I was, and surprise surprise, there was no cell phone reception. There seemed to be nothing except empty corn fields all around. I hoped to see an interstate sign or gas station to get directions, but the road just kept going.

Finally, I saw an old rugged sign saying "Midway Hotel." Thank God, a sign of life in this backwater place. I was sure it would be a dump, but it was getting dark. After a day that exhausting, I would've been happy to sleep on a cactus with a beehive as my pillow.

I followed the wooden signs and saw the hotel. It was a plain, multi-storey, concrete building that looked out of place in the grass prairie; it lacked any country charm. I parked, grabbed my bag and walked towards the grey, concrete steps. The hotel didn't have windows, but the walls seemed to glisten against the bright stars; the wind gently brushed my face. I felt nervous, but couldn't explain why. It was completely silent outside except for some chirping crickets and a distant cicada. I grabbed the cold metal railing and trudged up the steps to a sliding glass door that opened automatically.

I stumbled into a large, open lobby that had shiny, marble walls and high vaulted ceilings. It was very minimalistic and had no decor except for one red couch against a wall opposite a large old-fashioned wooden reception desk. There was a young woman and a small boy sitting on the red couch, they both looked fast asleep. It didn't feel like a hotel, it was more like a modern art museum with no exhibits. I walked slowly to the desk and felt self-conscious about my footsteps clicking on the tiled floor, since they were the only sound in this vacuous place. At the reception, I peered over the desk and saw an old lady sitting and staring at a computer. She was wearing a gray dress, glasses and had her white hair tied up in a neat bun. I thought her customer service skills needed work because she didn't greet me or even smile.

"Hi, I got a bit lost leaving the city and saw your hotel sign. Do you have a room for the night?" She paid no attention to me, her eyes were glued to the computer monitor at the corner of her desk. I watched the different colored lights of whatever she was watching reflect off her face. A few seconds ticked by. Feeling frustrated, I announced in a louder voice, "Excuse me, I hate to interrupt you, but can I get a room?"

The old lady stood up while gripping the arms of her chair and gave me a small nod. In a quiet, monotone voice, she said, "I will get your room key Mr. Stevens."

Mr. Stevens? How- How does she know my name? I didn't tell her my name. I was holding my credit card ready to pay for my room, so I figured she must have eagle eyes and saw my name on it.

A few seconds later, she returned from the back office and said, "No payment is necessary at this time," she was devoid of any personality and didn't even make eye contact with me. I stared at

her and felt eerie, her small blank face had no emotion, and her brown wrinkled eyes gave an empty stare like a robot.

I leaned forward to take the room key and caught a glimpse of the monitor. My entire body stopped in shock.

“Ma’am... What is that on your computer, a security camera or something? Can I see?”

She sighed and turned the screen off. “It’s nothing, just something for my work.”

I hesitantly took my key and walked towards the elevator. I couldn’t shake the creepy feeling. I thought I saw myself on the monitor, I was sure of it, but it was probably just security cameras. Inside the elevator, I looked at the buttons and became even more confused. There were no numbers, only two buttons, one white button for up and one black button for down.

“You don’t need that elevator, your room’s on this floor.” The old lady quietly instructed. She pointed to the hallway.

I walked out of the elevator still puzzled that there were only two buttons. I headed towards the long hallway next to the reception desk, it was a bright, elongated tunnel with doors either side. There was a woman there studying the room doors. She walked towards me.

“Isn’t it bizarre?” She spoke. “Every single room has the guest’s name and no numbers. That’s amazing personal service, don’t you think?”

The woman looked disorientated and her hair and clothes were dirty and ruffled as if she had just got out of bed.

“Huh?” I looked at my room key and there was no number, just my name, Mark Stevens. I stepped to the left to move around the lady and saw my name on a door. This place was extremely odd. How could a nameplate with my name be manufactured so fast? I felt so overwhelmed and tired from work that my brain just couldn’t handle deciphering the situation with this disheveled woman, so I smiled politely and started to enter my room trying to escape the conversation.

“I’m Monica Stewart. It was nice meeting you.” She gave a slight wave, and I gave a slight wave back as I watched her walk awkwardly down the hall, her eyes still glued to the doors.

I stepped into my room. It was simple decor with a bed covered in white, crisp sheets and a small bedside table and lamp. I was glad it was only for one night. I hated that it didn’t have a window, but it was dark outside anyway. I collapsed on the bed and tried to call my wife, but there was still no cell phone service and there wasn’t a phone in the room. I sighed knowing that would mean yet another argument and more accusations when I got home. I wanted to complain about the lack of WiFi, but felt too tired. I would deal with it after a nap.

I must have slept for a short while, but something woke me up. I tried to get back to sleep, but I couldn’t relax, my mind was racing with thoughts and questions. I needed to call my wife and the eeriness of the night bothered me. This hotel was weird, the strange old lady was hiding something. I know I saw something on that computer monitor, plus my name on my room door didn’t make any sense. Also, what hotel room has no phone? If I was going to get any sleep I’d have to get to the bottom of this. I slowly opened my door and crept down the hall. I peeked around the corner, and there she was. The old lady at the reception desk was watching the

computer monitor. I quietly crept towards the reception desk hoping to get a glimpse of what she was watching. I saw the woman and small boy still sitting on the red couch, but luckily they were both still asleep. I crouched behind the large wooden desk and popped my head over to see the screen. It looked like home video footage of a family. At the bottom of the screen, there was a bar, it kind of looked like a health bar from a video game, except the left half of the bar was black with a percentage written on it and the right side of the bar was white. Towards the middle of the bar was a small icon of a woman's face. I knew that face, "Monica Stewart." It was that woman I met in the hall! The family in the video was arguing. I was certain I was looking at a younger Monica. She was arguing with her parents about going to some school dance. She picked up a blue vase and threw it against the wall. It was then that something peculiar happened. Monica's little face icon at the bottom of the screen moved towards the black side of the bar. The movie footage changed to a new scene, a slightly older Monica driving her car at night. She pulled over and offered to help an old couple whose car had broken down. This time, Monica's face icon at the bottom of the screen moved slightly towards the white side of the bar. What on earth was going on? I thought to myself, maybe the old lady was a relative and that was why she had the footage, but what was the face icon and video game percentage bar all about? At that moment, the old lady started to stand up. My heart started to race; I crouched down and held my breath. I couldn't understand why an old lady would freak me out so much, but she did. I heard her footsteps tapping into the distance followed by a door closing. I popped my head up and she was gone. There was a sign that read, "On Break, Back in 30 minutes." This was my chance. I jumped over the reception desk. I believed that maybe if I fast-forwarded the movie footage to the end, I'd have a clue to what this was all about. I pushed play and in the last clip, there was a house fire and firefighters were outside. They were trying to revive a woman. It was Monica! I felt my heart beating out of my chest, I came to the horrific realization that this event looked real. I watched a firefighter push down on her chest over and over again, trying to save her, until eventually, he stopped. The firefighter backed away. She wasn't moving. After the last piece of footage, Monica's face icon had made it on the white side of the percentage bar. I felt my entire body sink as I saw the following words appear on the screen, "HEAVEN SELECTED." I heard the elevator ping, and suddenly, out of nowhere, Monica Stewart walked from the hall and headed towards the elevator. She smiled and gave me a slight wave as she walked into the elevator, all without saying a word. The door closed and up she went. I was so confused, was I dreaming? I ran to the elevator, but it was empty. I pounded at buttons, but nothing was happening.

I ran back to the reception desk and tried to use the telephone to call the police, but there was no dial tone. I frantically searched through the drawers and then I found it. A drawer filled with hundreds of USBs, each containing someone's name. They were organised in alphabetical order, with terror, I went to the S's and there I was. A USB with my name on it, Mark Stevens. I removed Monica's USB, and shoved my own into the computer. I took deep breaths to calm myself. I couldn't believe my eyes. I saw my childhood, the highlights, and the lowlights of my life. I saw my first day at school sharing my treats, the first time I got bullied and the fights with

my parents over bad grades. The times I was angry, happy and sad. The footage showed me meeting my wife, getting married, and having our daughter Penny. It was hard not to get emotional watching Penny grow older. The tape reached the part of my life when I got the promotion. I watched Penny alone in her room upset that I was away on business. I always arrived home after she had fallen asleep. Being on the road to get the next big deal had hurt my family and taken its toll on me too. I couldn't take the pressure and had started drinking too much. The footage flickered to one of the many nights I had too much to drink, a night that ended with me cheating on my wife. I felt horribly guilty; I decided I would never drink again, but I did. I drank all the time and continued to cheat and ignore my family. My face icon was now further in the black zone of the bar than Monica's icon ever was. I was so ashamed when I heard Penny say, "He's a drunk loser mom. The only thing he cares about is his stupid job. I don't care if I see him again." I felt sick to my stomach, my little girl was so upset. All I wanted to do was go home and hug her and apologize.

I was terrified, I couldn't watch anymore. I panicked and needed to find a way home. I needed to say sorry and make things right. I had to fix this, tell them I loved them. I would do anything to make things right. I ran for the hotel exit door, opened it and saw nothing except darkness. My car wasn't there, the sky wasn't there, the grass wasn't there, just a pitch black void. Pure nothingness. I hesitantly placed my toe out the door. For whatever strange reason, I could walk on the black. I started to run away from the hotel as fast as I could, hoping to find anything but darkness. Finally, in the distance, I saw a structure. Bursting with adrenaline, I ran towards it huffing and puffing with all my might. When I reached it, my jaw dropped because I was right in front of the hotel again, despite running in the opposite direction. This time, I ran left through the black void. I ran and I ran and I ran. Finally, I saw another building. I ran through the darkness praying for an escape, but there it was, the same hotel again. There was no escape. I hesitantly stepped back inside the hotel.

The old lady was still not at the reception desk. I decided to face my fate and started to watch the end of the video footage. It was today. I felt sick as I saw myself leaving the bar this morning. I watched myself stumble to my car, I witnessed my erratic driving and I knew in my gut what was going to happen next. My face icon was deep in the black zone. I couldn't watch, I couldn't witness my own death. Suddenly, I had an idea, the old woman wasn't back yet, she hadn't watched the whole tape. Maybe, there was a chance to change my destiny. I pushed a few buttons and started to erase the bad parts of my life on the tape. It was working, every time I erased something I did wrong, my icon moved towards the white. I started to feel relieved as I was getting deeper into the white territory and all the shameful events in my life were being erased. I took out the USB, and placed it back in the drawer where I had found it. I ran back to my hotel room because I didn't want the old woman to have any suspicion of what I had done.

I paced the room, anxiously thinking I was saved from whatever purgatory hell this was. It seemed like hours, but only 10 minutes had passed and I couldn't wait anymore. I needed to see the old lady and get this strange experience sorted out. I walked with purpose and determination to the lobby. I noticed the young woman and little boy on the red couch were

finally awake. I was going to stop and tell her all about this weird hotel, but I wanted to see the old lady first.

At the reception, the old lady was watching the computer monitor intently. She ignored my presence, I was seething and said, "Now look here, I don't know what's going on, but I want to know the truth!"

Without averting her gaze from the monitor, the old lady said calmly, "Sorry for the delay Mr. Stevens, there was not enough information for us to determine your next destination, but further assessments are being done."

I leaned over the desk and whispered in an angry voice, "What are you talking about? I know about the videos and the black void outside. I don't know if this is real or if I'm in purgatory, a coma, or a nightmare, but watch my footage. There's nothing bad. I'm a good man, I didn't do anything to hurt anyone. I want to be out of here!"

Suddenly, there was a ping. I turned and saw the elevator doors open and the young woman and the little boy finally got up from the red couch and walked into the elevator. The elevator went up.

"Hey, how come they left?"

The old woman turned the computer monitor towards me and said, "Mr. Stevens the verdict is in."

I watched the screen and realized it was not my videotape, it was a tape of the young woman and her little boy in a car singing and laughing as they drove along. I watched in horror as I saw my car swerving to the opposite side of the highway heading straight for them. Both of our cars collided and exploded. I said nothing as I felt my body being sucked into the elevator, there was nothing I could do to stop it. The doors closed and the black down button illuminated.

